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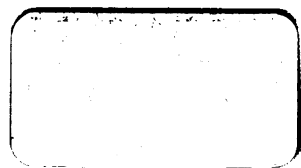
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AUNT LIEFY

2397

BY

ANNIE TRUMBULL SLOSSON

Author of "Fishin' Jimmy," etc.

With Illustrations

By G. F-RANDOLPH



NEW YORK

ANSON D. F. RANDOLPH & CO.

(INCORPORATED)

182 FIFTH AVENUE

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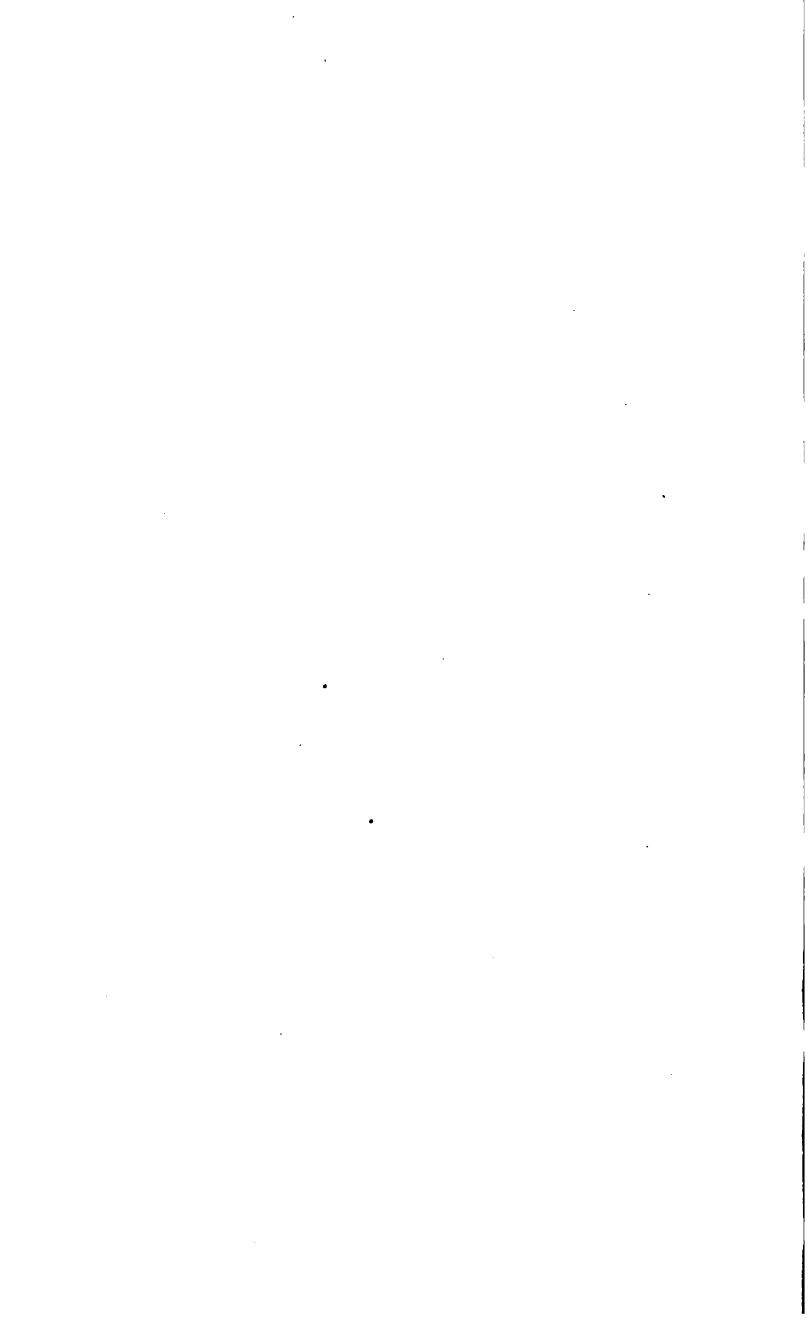


University Press :
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE.

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AUNT LIEFY.



I.

I DON'T know how it come about exactly; mebbe 't was because I never rec'lected any folks of my own. Or again, p'r'aps 't was owin' to the people where I lived not bein' of the sociable sort. Or mebbe, likely's not, 't was all the fault of my own queer, cross-grained, hard-to-get-along-with natur'. But tennerate, there 't was, — a fact well known to me and other folks, that I was the lonesomest creatur' that ever lived. I had n't a real friend on the airth; more 'n that, I had n't scursely any acquaintances.

Folks in the village and town knew who I was, most of 'em, and I knew their names and some of their faces; but that was about all.

You asked me for just one partic'lar part of my story, and I 'm goin' to give it to you. As for the rest, why, there 's no call for me to go into that now, and I ain't a-goin' to. How I come to be there in Hilton, without any one belongin' to me, or a soul in the whole world to set by me, or me to set by, why all that 's another story, so we 'll let it alone now. And I 'll begin just here, when I was a grown-up woman, hard featur'd and harder natur'd, not liked by anybody, and not havin', myself, a mite of int'rest in any one on this airth or outside of it. Never mind what I done for a livin'; I got along. I had enough to eat and drink, and clo'es to wear; and

I was n't beholden to anybody. I lived by myself in that same little red house just out of the village where you fust see me,—the lonesomest



creatur', as I said afore, that God ever made. My whole name, you know, is Relief Staples; but 't was years and years since I 'd heard the fust part. I was "Miss Staples" to the whole town; and yet 't was n't the kind of

place where they give folks sech names gen'rally. Other single women of my age — old maids I suppose you 'd call 'em — was Ann Nichols or Lizzy Mount or Hopey Palmer; and the married ones was Aunt this or Aunt that or Mother somebody. But I was allers "Miss Staples" to man, woman, and child, speakin' about me, or to me, no matter which. And, queer enough, I never thought of myself by any other name. I 'd most forgot I was Relief at all; for I even signed my name — to a bill or paper, I never writ a letter — R. Staples.

I don't seem to remember much about when I was a girl. There was reasons that have n't got anything to do with this story, why I was diff'ent from the other children. Strangers that come along and die right in the public roads, and leave young ones

too little to know their own names or where they come from, can't expect their children to be fav'rites in the c'mmunity, especially if they 're put in among the town-poor at fust. I know I got some schoolin' at the little deestricht school on the north road; but I don't rec'lect much about the other children playin' with me, or callin' me by my fust name, as they done one 'nother in the games or in spellin' and readin'. I don't b'lieve I liked 'em much or them me; for after I growed up I allers had a dislike to young ones, and they returned it every speck. Fact is, I can't remember likin' anything much in them days. I done my work without takin' much notice of it; I eat my meals, sometimes one place, sometimes another, settin' or standin', or workin' about, as I felt like it. I went to bed and got

up ; that was my life. All my neighbors had posy gardens, and most of



'em had flowers in the house too ; but I never thought of sech a thing. What was the use of it? I went to meetin' sometimes ; because — well, I

don't seem to rec'lect why I did go, but I did. But it did n't int'rest me, and I did n't take no great notice of what went on. That it meant much of anything to me, myself, never come into my head in those days.

II.

I 'M leavin' out, as I said afore, everything that has n't really got to do with my story. So I need n't stop to tell you how it come about that I was trav'lin' one day, — the day my story really begins, — on a kind of business errand, over the Middle railroad, nor how I come to get off at the wrong station ; but there I was. I meant to go to Wellsville. I'd been there afore and knew how it looked ; and the train had n't hardly started after leavin' me before I see I was wrong. There was n't any real depot, only a kind of platform to wait on, and there was n't a soul in sight. I looked about a little, and then I

begun to walk along the road, not carin' much what I did. My business was n't pressin', 't was the middle of the day and lots of daylight ahead, so I jest walked slowly along. The road was an uphill one, and no houses along it at fust. I rec'lect that, though I did n't notice much besides; for up to that day, you know, I never did notice things. But that was the last of that way of livin', as you 'll see pretty soon.

It was in the fall of the year, early in October, and as I could tell from what come arterwards, the trees all along the way was red and yellor and bright-lookin', and I was steppin' on leaves colored the same way; but I did n't seem to see 'em. I don't know how long or how fur I walked, or what I was thinkin' about. Somehow it don't seem as if I ever was thinkin'

much about anything those times. Mebbe my mind run a little on that piece of business I was goin' to attend to, or some work I'd promised to do, I don't remember.

The fust thing that stands out, as I look back now, was hearin' a man speakin'. He was in a buggy; but I had n't noticed the sound of wheels, and he was close up to me comin' down the road facin' me, as if he was on the way to the station I'd come from, 'fore I see him. He drewed up right alongside of me. He was an oldish man, with a pleasant-lookin' kind of face, only a mite solemn and sorry like, and he says, "I'm so glad you've got here. They've waited, thinkin' you might be on this train. I'm goin' on to tell the minister, or I'd give you a lift; but some one'll meet you." And then, 'fore I'd had



time to say anything, he says, in a low sort of voice, "I 'm dreadful sorry for you ; we all be." And then he started his horse and rode away. It seems odd now that I did n't wonder more about what he meant, or ask him somethin', or call after him that I guessed he'd made a mistake. But, if you 'll believe me, all I could think of in that fust minute was that somebody was waitin' for me and expectin' me ; somebody was glad I'd come ; and, 'bove and over all, somebody was dreadful sorry for me. Not one of them things, 's fur's I know, had ever happened to me afore, and though I made sure 't was all a mistake, somehow jest for a minute I had the comfortablest feelin' I'd ever had in my life. Comfortable in my mind, I mean ; but queer enough, it made me feel weak in my body and with a kind

of choked-up, swelly throat. I walked along, tryin' to think, when I see a carryall comin' down the road towards me, with a boy drivin'.

“Oh, there you be!” he says, as he stopped the old horse. “Get right in. They put off the funeral, you see, thinkin' you might get here on this noon-train.”

I stood still in the road, lookin' at him; but he says, “Hurry! Pa told me to drive quick;” and I got in. I don't know what made me do it. I go over and over that day sometimes in my mind, and try to think how 't was I fell in with everything so, without explainin' or askin' questions. The only way I can make it out reasonable is, that I was so took up with this bein' expected and took notice of and made much on, that I jest let myself have the comfort of it all,

without sayin' or doin' a thing that might 'a' stopped it. The boy did n't say much; he driv fast, shakin' the reins and cluckin' to the horse. The road was pretty rough, and the wagon was shackly and shook about and rattled, and we could n't 'a' held much talk even if we'd had a mind to. We met some folks, and they all looked at me in the same way, kind of int'rested and friendly, but allers sorry, real sorry, — that was what struck me most.

“They 've mistook me for somebody else,” I says to myself; “but I can't help likin' it, and I won't tell 'em jest for a spell. It feels so good to be looked at that way, I'll wait a minute 'fore I tell 'em.” Mebbe I did n't put it into jest them words, but I was thinkin' somethin' most like that, I know.

All of a sudden the boy whoaed his horse and stopped. I see a little gal in a red frock runnin' 'crost the road and holdin' up somethin'. She was all out of breath and her little face red, she'd run so; and she did n't say anythin', on'y reached up and put somethin' in my lap and run off. The boy whipped up, and we went on. I looked down into my lap and see some yellor posies.

"What be they?" I says, more to my own self than anything. But the boy, he says, in that kind of way boys does when they're sorry and most ashamed of bein', "Gold'nrod, ye know, that she set so much by."

Now that bloom grows all along the roads through our part of the country; but somehow I had n't ever noticed it afore, and I never'd heerd its name,—not to rec'lect it. And

whoever did he mean by "she"? But that give me a little more to hold on by. All this bein' sorry for me, and takin' care and all, had somethin' to do with this somebody he spoke of as "she." I begun to feel dreadful queer and choky, and 's if I must know right straight off all about her, and what had happened. It's a mistake, I says to myself, but oh, I jest can't let on that 't is yet, and me to go back to bein' no account to anybody, and never wanted or expected anywheres again.

We kep' meetin' folks: but they all turned 's quick as they see us, and went back the way we was goin'. And I could hear teams comin' along behind us too.

Bimeby I see a little white house ahead and a good many men-folks standin' round it. And the boy

drawed up in front of that house. Two or three men come out to the carriage, plain, farmer-lookin' men, with kind of tanned, weather-beat



faces, but all with the same sort of sorry look, and I see they was goin' to help me out. I'd jest been a goin' to tell 'em who I was and how 't was all a mistake; but for the life of me I could n't then.

They 'll find me out in a minute, I says to myself ; but I can't tell 'em now. For you see, in all my born days I had n't ever afore been helped out of anything, and I wanted to see how 't would seem. They done it real gentle ; and somehow they led me into the gate. All the men in the front-yard, they stood back each side of the path, while I walked up to the door. I had n't more 'n stepped over the sill into the entry, where 'twas sort of dark, when I felt somethin' queer, warm, and soft, and wrappy ; and I see I was in somebody's arms. 'T was an old woman with white hair, and a soft, wrinkled face, and sech a mothery look all over her, — I wonder how my mother looked ; and she put her face up again' mine, and I felt 't was all wet. I don't believe I 'd ever, afore that,

felt anybody's tears, not even my own, sence I was a baby.

She 'll say somethin' now, I thinks to myself, that 'll show me where the mistake is; and then 't will all come out, and I 'll jest go back. But she didn't say but one thing, after all, and that didn't help. "Oh, my dear, my dear!" she says. That was all.

You can't blame me for not tellin' then, not jest then, can you? S'pose you hadn't ever in all your hull life been called "my dear;" and you was all kind of shakin' and chokin' and cryey, and glad and sorry to once with hearin' it, could you go and spile it right straight off by ownin' up you hadn't no claim to it? Well, I couldn't any way.

She took me into a little bedroom and put me in a chair. She said

there was plenty of time for me to rest a spell ; for folks had got to be let know I was come, and that the fun'ral could go on. She untied my bunnet-strings, and unpinned my shawl. She done a lot of things to me that I did n't hardly know what was, they was so new and queer to me, not bein' used to 'em, you know. She talked a good deal ; but I did n't take much notice of the words, I was so took up with her softly voice and the things she was doin' to me. But I know she kep' sayin' over 'n' over, " If you could only 'a' got here afore she went ! If you could only 'a' got here ! "

I tried to say somethin' ; but some ways my throat was all dry, and 'fore I could get out any words, she says, " Oh, I know you could n't, you poor dear creatur', and she knew it

too. She wanted you dreadful bad," she says, the tears a runnin' down her pretty, old, wrinkled face; "but she knew you could n't get here, and most the very last word she spoke was your name, my dear."

Well, that finished me. Up to that time I had n't cried any myself. I don't b'lieve I knew how exactly, never havin' done it sence I was a baby. But now I found the water fallin' out o' my eyes like rain. Mebbe 't was because I knew 't was all a mistake; mebbe again owin' to my half-believin' 't was real and true after all, and somebody was layin' dead that had set by me so that she'd wanted me dreadful, and said over my name with her last breath most. Anyway I cried and cried and cried. I'd 'a' said afore that, if anybody'd asked me, that it must

hurt to cry, that I should n't like it; but — I did. It seemed to help me, and rest me, and comfort me, to make me diff'ent from what I'd ever been afore in all my life, — more like other folks, and jest a little mite like the white-haired old woman and the people outside with that sorry look on their featur's.

I don't know how long 't was, mebbe only a few minutes, mebbe more, but arter a spell anyway, we went out o' that little bed-room and into the settin'-room. It was shet up and dark like, and I could n't see much at fust. They put me into a seat; and pretty soon I found there was lots of folks round me. There was chairs in rows, and people in 'em; and there was a somethin', black and strange, covered and shet up and still, and I knew without bein'

told that she they 'd said had wanted me, and set by me, and spoke about me up to the very last, was layin' there. My old woman was settin' close by me; and when she see my eyes fixed on that, she says in a whisper, "I wish you could 'a' seen her, she was so peaceful and pleasant-lookin' and nat'ral. But you know how 't was, and that we couldn't wait."

So I was n't goin' to see her, even this way! I should n't ever know how she looked, livin' or dead. Well, I was n't exactly sorry. I most dreaded the idee of seein' her; for fear somehow I might be disap'nted. For I 'd got a'ready a notion of my own about her, from what the dear old woman told me, and things I heerd whispered round as we set waitin'.

Then somebody says, "Here's the minister," and an old man come up to me. I looked up at him; I had n't ever seen jest sech a face afore, or if I had it had n't made much impression on me. 'T was n't exactly sorry, but 's if it had been over'n' over again, and knew all about it; and there was a look as if he was hopin' somethin' real hard, and lottin' on gettin' it too,—a kind of shinin' in his eyes and a still sort of look jest round his mouth. He took hold of my hand, and he said somethin'. It don't seem as if I heerd the words, each one on 'em; but I gathered lots o' meanin' out of it somehow, and I knew that he was dreadful sorry for me, but glad enough for her, though I could n't hardly see why jest then, and I see too that he knew I was goin' to be glad too, some day.

Well, the fun'ral begun and went on. I disremember whether or no I'd ever been to a fun'ral afore; but I'd seen 'em go by, of course, and thought I knew all about 'em. But this was n't a bit like what I'd conceived. I can't tell you jest how 't was diff'ent; mebbe one thing was I was diff'ent, even in that short spell. Things the minister read or spoke, though I'd heerd some of 'em afore in meetin' and elsewheres, got to meanin' somethin' now when I was listenin' so close to find out somethin' about her that laid there, and whether there was any chance of my seein' her some day. And when he prayed, — well, I'd seen folks pray, time and again, but did n't think of its meanin' much of anythin'; and as for prayin' myself I did n't s'pose I knew how. P'r'aps I

did n't and wa'n't prayin' then; but I was secondin' ev'ry single thing the old minister said, and hopin' with all my heart and mind and body they 'd come true. Ain't that a kind of prayin'? And somebody else said somethin'; and they sung things softly, and prayed again. And in ev'ry single thing I could see they thought she that laid there b'longed to me more 'n to anybody else, and that I was the sorriest of any one there. They prayed for me more 'n all the rest; they talked about me, not by name, but "our sister," they says, "her that's so sorely afflicted," "she that was so closely bound up with her that's gone," and things like that. Oh, I can't begin to tell you what 't was to me to be, for the fust time in all my days, right in the middle of things, 'stead of alone

outside; with folks all lovin' me and bein' sorry for me and askin' for things to happen to me. I could n't, I jest could n't put a stop to it all by ownin' up 't was a mistake somehow.

And then we went to the little buryin'-ground. 'T was close by, and folks walked; and I was ahead of all, and closest to her. I can see it all so plain, for I b'lieve 't was the fust out-o'-doors thing I'd ever really looked at,—in a takin'-notice way, I mean. The trees — there was a lot of 'em round — was all bright and gay-lookin' with their red and yeller and browny leaves, and the sky was all blue with little white clouds strimmered over it. There was ever so many posies growin' in the paths, gold'nrod — I'd learnt that name a'ready — and purple blooms mixed

in with 'em, and the air was full of a minty, spicy sort o' smell from yarbs in the grass. And up in a tree, jest over the place they'd dug her grave, set a little bird a-singin' 's loud and sweet 's he could sing.

Then the minister said some words,—sing'lar, wonderful sort o' words they 'peared to me then, in fact they do now,—and they laid her down there. And the sun was a-shinin'; there was a bumble-bee buzzin' about the posies, and a butterfly lightin' on 'em. And up in the maple, 'mongst the red leaves, that little bird was singin' with all his might and main. There was some tears o' course; but folks kep' smilin' through 'em till they was more like rainbows.

Why, thinks I to myself, 'tain't like

a fun'ral one bit; it's more like plantin' a flower.

And then they all come round me, jest me; the women, the men, the children, and ev'ry one had somethin' to say about her that was gone, and what she'd been to 'em all, what she was to me and me to her. There was an old blind man she'd took care of and read to, and some little orphan children she'd mothered and done for; and there was friends she'd been friend to, and meetin'-folks she'd worked with in doin' good and — all of a sudden it all come over me what she must a been and how I'd heerd of her too late; and then I thought o' my lonesome, dried-up, good-for-nothin' life all ahind me, and how diff'ent 't would 'a' been if she'd really b'longed to me, as these folks all

thought she done, and seemed 's if I could n't bear it. Sech a sorrer and longin' and mournin' and grief come rollin' over me, like waves o' the sea, and I see I'd never had any real trouble or grief or loss afore in my life. Oh, what was it for? What did it mean? How was I goin' to bear it anyhow?

They see I was givin' way, and one after 'nother begun to tell me things she'd said about me, word she'd sent to me. "She said she'd be watchin' for you till you come," says one, most in a whisper. "She told me," says another, "to tell you not to feel bad you could n't get here to take care of her, ' For ' says she, ' if you'll on'y take care o' somebody else that's sick or lonesome 't will be jest the same 's doin' it for me.' " And a little gal, with yeller curls

and sech a soft face, reached up, and says in the littlest whisper, "She told me to give you this." And she kissed me. I never 'd been kissed afore.

And then the old minister, he kind of drawed me to one side and he says, "She asked me over and over, afore she died, to tell you this, that she forgive you everythin', if there was anythin' to forgive, and that you must n't mourn and fret thinkin' mebbe you was one cause of her dyin'; for even if you was, she was glad, and more 'n glad, to lay down her life for you."





III.

I CAN'T hardly rec'lect how I got away from 'em all, and from that grave and the little buryin'-ground, and found my way back to the station. I on'y know I did n't tell 'em 't all 't was a mistake, but come away without ownin' up anythin'. I took the cars back to Hilton. I see so many things out of the winder I had n't took notice of that mornin'. There was gold'nrod all 'long side the way, — her fav'rite flower; with the sun a shinin' on it and the cars goin' by so quick, it made the roads look like the golden streets the minister 'd talked about. And I see little buryin'-grounds with green graves and white

stones that made me think of where she was layin'. And when we stopped, sometimes I'd hear a bird like that one up in the maple-tree. There was a little gal in the car with yeller curls, like the one that kissed me, and I found myself a-smilin' at her, and she smiled back to me.

And when I got out at my station and was walkin' up the village street to the red house, things looked diff'ent from what they ever done afore. I see I was walkin' on red and yeller leaves that looked pretty and made a rustlin' sort of noise as I stepped on 'em, jest 's they done 's I stood in the little buryin'-ground where we laid her. And there was little white houses along the street, somethin' like the one where I'd been, and where I s'pose she'd lived; and I begun to wonder if there was anybody resem-

blin' her livin' in these. I never'd wondered much about folks afore, did n't take any int'rest in 'em.

And jest 'fore I got to my house I see a woman comin'. She had a black dress on, and 's I looked at her I rec'lected she was a neighbor o' mine, and that I'd heerd she'd lost her on'y child, a little boy, a spell back. All of a sudden I 'peared to know what that meant, and see the coffin, and him a-layin' in it, and the folks all together, and I heerd the minister's voice sayin' them wonderful words; and 'fore I knew what I was doin' I held out my hand to her and I heerd my own voice a-sayin', "I'm dreadful sorry for you."

She looked into my face 's if she had n't ever see it afore, — I s'pose it looked diff'ent somehow, with my eyes all swelly and red, — and she

says, with the tears a-comin' fast, "Thank ye, thank ye! I see you've met with a loss yourself, Miss Staples, and that makes you feel for me."

I wa' n't tellin' a lie, was I, when I says, "I have, I have, and I do feel for you!" For I had lost all I ever had in my hull life, and jest's quick's I knew I had it, too.

Now, 't is n't scurcely the thing for me to tell the rest; I don't hardly know how to say it. You asked me to tell you how 't was I changed about so, as folks told you I done, — from a lonesome, unfeelin', unreligious woman, not havin' a mite of int'rest in anybody, nor them havin' any in me, to somethin' diff'ent. And I've told you all I know about what fetched about the change.

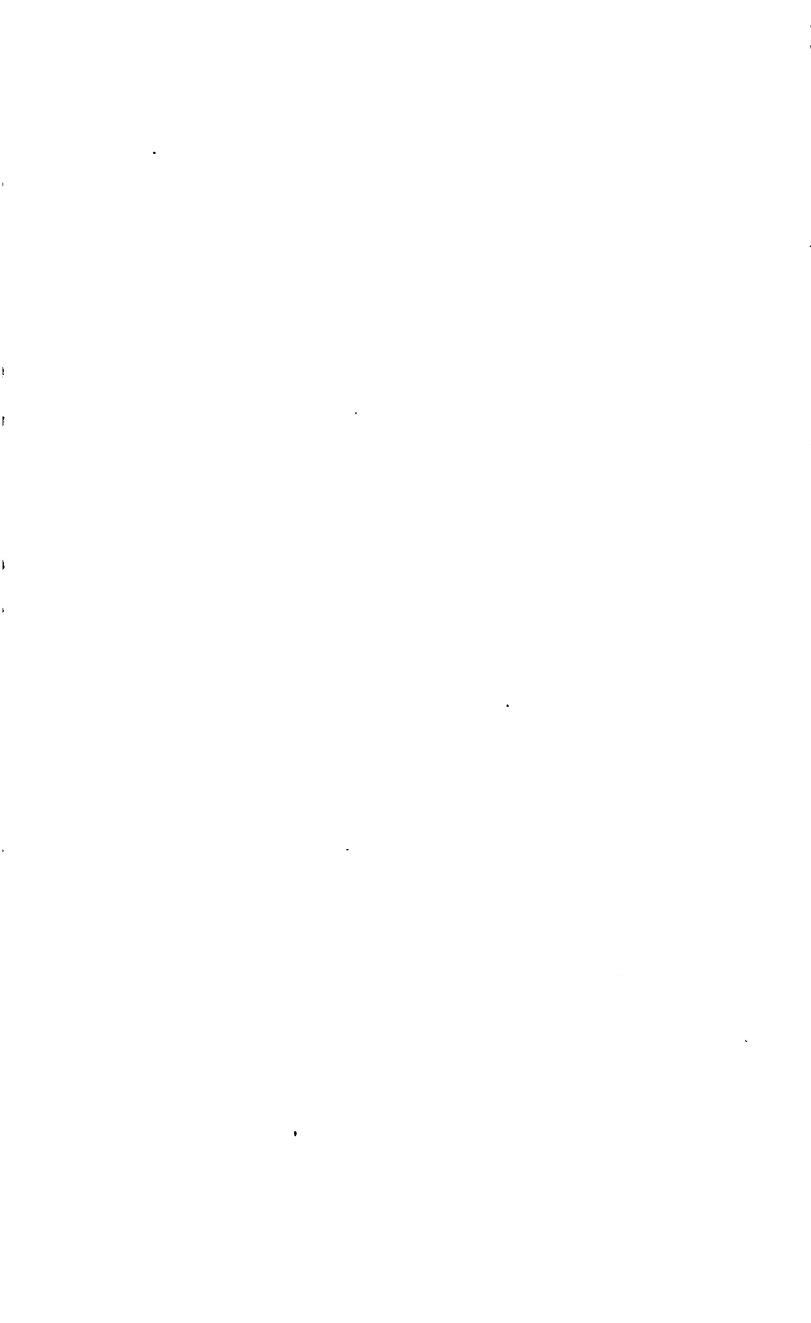
I never knew anythin' more about that fun'ral, nor the one we buried

that day, nor what I was to her nor her to me. I was afraid to find out, so I never asked any questions, nor went back to that station, nor looked in the papers to see who was dead there. As long's I did n't really know the partic'lars, nor who they took me for, and why they took me for her, why there was n't any harm, was there, in my feelin' she was mine now, let alone what she'd been afore; that that was my grave to think on and mourn over, and, what's more, hope about? Tennerate I done it; and small credit to me that it fetched me some good, and made me alter my old, hateful ways. For it stands to reas'n that havin' a sorrer myself — and 't was one, though mebbe you can't see how — made me notice other folks's troubles and feel for 'em and try to help 'em, as I was helped.

And hearin' what she liked and set
by, posies and sech, made me begin
to notice and get fond on 'em myself.
And that's how my gardin got to



what 't was when you fust see it, and
my winders and porch so chock full
of growin' things. And of course
you see now how I took to feedin'
them birds that you was so struck





with, comin' round the steps and pickin' up my crumbs and seeds, lightin' on me and all that; that was owin', you see, to that little bird a-singin' in the red maple over her grave. I never forgot him, the peart little fellow, singin' and singin' away with all his might and main 's if he knew somethin' good was goin' to happen. And them queer folks you used to watch a-comin' in my gate and hangin' round there, — old lame Jesse and foolish Nance and that little rickety Dan with the hump on his poor little back, — why I had them come and done for 'em, on'y jest 'cause she done that kind of thing, they said. 'T wa' n't nothin' 'riginal on my part, that wa' n't, — jest copyin' her, you see.

That was why I took to nussin' the sick and all that; and that 's how they

come to take to callin' me Aunt Relief, and then Aunt Liefy, 'stead o' Miss Staples.

The other part — 't ain't for me to say a word about that; Some One else done it, if 't is done. It's reas'n-able, ain't it, that I should take some kind of int'rest in what made this friend of mine I had n't ever see the sort of person they made her out; and that I should study up about that, and about those sing'lar words the minister used at the fun'ral, and about the place where she'd gone to, and 'bove and over all what chance there was of my gettin' to see her, after a spell. And findin' out concernin' all them things, why of course I found out more 'n I was lookin' for. You see, the one thing that had worked on me most that day was hearin' she'd forgive me things; for I

had n't ever been forgive anythin' in my hull life, — not to know it, I mean. And somehow I did n't dwell on that part about my havin' done anythin' to bring about her death, as much 's I did on what she said about bein' glad and more 'n glad to lay down her life for me. That was the one thing I guess I thought of most, comin' home that day from her buryin' and arterwards. Any one that set by me enough to be glad to lay their life down on my account, it seemed too sing'lar to take in, and 's if it could n't act'lly be. Well, it don't seem a mite less sing'lar now; but I've found it could act'lly be!

So I'm jest a-goin' on all the time now as if I'd had folks. It's most 's if I'd had, you see. I've got a grave anyhow, in a little sweet, minty, spicy-smellin' buryin'-ground full o' posies,

gold'nrod and sech ; and I 've got messages some one left for me, — word she sent, — and I 'm follerin' 'em and doin' 'em 's well 's I can. And I 've been once in my life to a fun'ral that was more to me than to any one else there, where I was prayed for and comforted and pitied and set by. It's most 's if I 'd had folks, don't you think so? That's what I hold.

And I don't see how I done anybody any harm by not tellin' 't was all a mistake and I was took for somebody else. If I was, why I guess the right one got along a spell arterward and got the same comfort out of it I did, and mebbe more. So 't didn't hurt her.

And there 's one thing can't be took from me. There was somebody lay there that day, whether she was anythin' to me afore all that or not;

and I know what she'd been from what folks said about her; and I know where she's gone from what she was and b'lieved and said. So there ain't no manner o' harm, and you can't make me think there is, in my lookin' forrard to seein' her one of these days, and pretty soon now. And when I do see her, why, I sha'n't have to go into a long explainin' and showin' how it come about, and why I did n't own up that day she was buried. She'll see it in a minute, if she ain't seen it a'ready; and that if I ain't that one she'd set by so long and that had set by her, I'm the one that's jest lived for her ever sence, and tried to copy her and act like her, and love the ones she loved, and do for the ones she done for, and, partic'lar, that's tried to get herself ready and fit to be let in to see her some day.

And I know cert'in sure that there 's
Some One else up there that 'll under-
stand all about it too, without my tell-
in'; and He'll know what 't was to
me to think of a buryin' spot filled
with sweet spices, in a place like a
gardin o' posies, and of some one lay-
in' there for a spell, — some one that
had set by me so much that she'd 'a'
been glad and more 'n glad to lay
down her life for me.

THE END.

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